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Preserving the archives in the 21st century classroom: designing history classes around primary source research.

Abstract

This article details an experiment in an 11th and 12th grade 3-week intensive course, the Science and History of Contagious Disease. The course was an interdisciplinary survey of how diseases are spread along with an examination of social responses. Although both lecture and discussion based, the course revolved primarily around a trip in which we led approximately 22 students through archival research in the City of Savannah Municipal Archives on the Yellow Fever epidemics of 1820, 1854, and 1876. The article describes the numerous advantages of archival work, from direct contact with rare and unique primary sources to the frustration students felt struggling with nineteenth-century handwriting. The article also addresses some of the stumbling blocks experienced by students as well as the strategies and prompts used to foster student engagement with direct primary documents that led to a critical assessment of a group of sources and a new appreciation for local history.

Keywords

Archives, primary sources, Georgia history, student research, Yellow Fever, critical thinking

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Four years ago, my K-12 independent school instituted a JanTerm in the high school grades, a mini-semester of three weeks in which each student would participate in one intensive class for the duration of that time. Teachers were encouraged, as much as possible, to work in the community, to explore areas outside of the school campus, and to design a class that was hands-on and immersive while still being as academically rigorous as our normal course offerings. As our school in urban Atlanta draws 800 high-school students from 76 zip codes, my colleague and I decided we wanted to design a class that incorporated an interdisciplinary approach with wide appeal that would particularly draw students in their last two years of high school who had an interest in both science and history.

My colleague and I decided on the topic of plagues in history, incorporating both the biology and history of contagious diseases, from the fourteenth-century Black Plague itself to more emerging diseases and hemorrhagic fevers featured frequently in the news like Lassa Fever and Ebola. Designed with both lecture and discussion, the course was an interdisciplinary survey of how diseases are spread, along with an examination of social responses. Although many initial classes were dedicated to science, such as lessons on the immune system, the nature of viruses and bacteria, and how infections progress, we decided the course would ultimately revolve around a trip in which students could spend extended time in an archive studying both medical and social responses to one specific pathogen.

Planning

As an historian, my immediate concern in designing both the curriculum and the subsequent trip was how to get students access to relevant primary records and how to make those records genuinely applicable to the topic at hand. In the struggle to leap into so-called ‘21st-century skills,’ the history teacher can often find an over-reliance on websites and Google searches, with a corresponding neglect of traditional sources, forgotten or just not yet digitized. Primary sources, particularly those singular ones in an archive, are the mainstay of historical research, and provide students the “unfiltered access” necessary to examine the past in both a critical and analytical way. They are crucial to student appreciation and understanding of the historical process, engaging as they do student interest, particularly because “in analyzing primary sources, students move from concrete observations and facts to questioning and making inferences about the materials” (“Teachers: Using Primary Sources,” n.d.). More critically, these sources “force students to realize that any account of an event, no matter how impartially presented it appears to be, is essentially subjective” (“History in the Raw,” 2016). Additionally, it is essential that, “when dealing directly with primary sources,

students engage in asking questions, thinking critically, making intelligent inferences, and developing reasoned explanations and interpretations of events and issues in the past and present” (“Teaching With Primary Sources,” n.d.). With all of these directives in mind, we wanted students to experience diverse primary sources, so we settled on Savannah as our destination, as the city suffered three major Yellow Fever epidemics in the nineteenth century and had the perfect repository where we could lead approximately 22 students through research in the City of Savannah Municipal Archives.

We chose an archive rather than a library because the sources available in archives are untapped goldmines for students and teachers, and archivists are especially trained to curate a collection in conjunction with interested faculty. While many excellent primary sources are available in digital format, an archive, whether governmental, religious, historical, community or corporate, provides students with a profoundly unique opportunity to examine rare and exclusive documents, photos and artifacts pertaining to a particular course of study. Besides exposure to unique sources, the advantages of working in an archive are numerous: students increase their awareness of useful sources that are held in storage, they learn the practical skills of working in an archive, they do hands-on research with material held in written form as well as on microfiche and microfilm, they learn to decipher handwriting, and they practice citing sources that they have actually come into contact with.

Many teachers, especially at the secondary level, may be unfamiliar with leading students in archival research unless they are fortunate enough to have an archive associated within their institution. Open access to archival research is still a fairly recent historical occurrence as both government and historical societies traditionally allowed only narrow access to their collections. As Mary Pugh has argued, “Since the 1960s the trend has been to open access to a broader public. Freedom of information legislation, open meeting requirements, and sunshine laws provided wider access to information in the public sphere generally, and this sense of the public’s right to know spilled over to archives as well” (Pugh, 1992, p. 5). So, for historians, more open access to archives is still a relatively recent development, more relevant to the esoteric world of the college professor than that of the high school teacher or student.

Additionally, Ken Osborne writes about the necessary and reciprocal relationship between archives and the public but points out that archives have traditionally lagged behind other community spaces like museums and libraries in their public outreach. Schools offer a specific means to facilitate that end: “To work with schools helps to provide a focus that is not always easy to find when dealing

with public education in the broadest sense where it is difficult to know just who the audience is and how it might best be reached” (Osborne, 1986, p.18). An activity like this one not only benefits students but also helps archives to curate collections for particular schools that can assist in their outreach programs. Marcus Robyns also argues that, “a failure to use archives as a teaching resource denies education a tool in improving the quality of historical training” (Robyns, 2001, p.373). He makes the significant point that direct student engagement with primary sources is vital for developing the process of critical thinking, and that the archivist is in a unique position to facilitate that contact because they are “the guardians of the nuts and bolts of history” (2001, p.374). In short, teachers and schools that use archival resources are helping to pioneer a symbiotic relationship that benefits the archives as much as it does the student-researchers.

In an ideal world, I wanted the archival process in Savannah to mimic the type of “real” research that the professional historian engages in, when the scholar or researcher encounters a frustrating dead end, or finds a radically different story than she expected, or is simply overwhelmed with material. In this particular case, I was hampered by the short contact time I had with students in order to give them the fluency in subject matter that would allow them some competency in an archives, but I found that the students’ experience in the archives was so novel, the sources so unique, and the handwriting so archaic and initially inaccessible, that they did have that feeling of being lost in the sources, but because of the work of the archivist, they were still grounded by the expertise of the curated material.

In preparing for archival research, I patterned our process on a selection of protocols established in Weiner, Morris and Mykytiuk’s 2015 article, *Archival Literacy Competencies for Undergraduate History Majors*. Although I did not expect students to attain full competency in a three-week course, the four principles I deemed appropriate for secondary students were the guide in designing the activity and subsequent follow-up questions. These standards meant that students needed to:

- Accurately conceive of primary sources
- Locate primary sources
- Use a research question, evidence, and argumentation to advance a thesis
- Obtain guidance from archivists
- Demonstrate acculturation to archives

Subsequent standards related to publication were deemed too advanced for secondary students, and we also disregarded the authors’ second standard - to locate

primary sources - as too difficult for the level we were engaging, particularly as I had already chosen the archives in question. (Weiner, Morris, & Mykytiuk, 2015). As Aaron G. Noll (2014) has argued, “While an instructor’s increased exposure of students to primary sources improves their ability to think critically about those sources, such thinking is entirely different from the ability to do effective archival research to find those sources” (Noll, 2014).

Implementation

Choosing an appropriate archive can involve some considerable legwork on the front end for the teacher, but the archive experience is unique for students as many do not realize that archives are so different from the experience of a library, and that the archive “can hold both published and unpublished materials, and those materials can be in any format...Materials in an archives are often unique, specialized, or are objects, meaning very few of them exist in the world, or they are the only ones of their kind” (Schmidt, 2016). For this project, we worked with the City of Savannah Research Library and Municipal Archives to curate a local, Georgia-related sampling of sources that would pertain to our class on the history and science of contagious diseases. We are fortunate enough at our own school to have an archivist on staff who gave the students a one-hour workshop on what to expect in an archive, particularly helping students understand how archives differ from public libraries. She coached the students on what they could and could not bring to the archives, how to store their belongings, and how to use the materials. She also offered students practical tips for how an archive works and how materials are generally stored, explaining that users are typically allowed only one box or folder at a time, rather than open access to stacks or shelves. The archivist explained the right of library staff to examine backpacks, that they could only use pencils to write with, and that many of the sources they would work with were extremely rare and must be held flat at all times. She also gave them a facsimile of a handwriting sample to struggle through in order for them to practice decoding the script. Additionally, she helped the students fill out the City of Savannah’s public research application ahead of time, saving us valuable time at the location. Finally, she answered questions about specific rules and procedures which saved the Savannah archivist time when we arrived at the site. (Nye, 2018).

For our trip itself, Luciana Spracher, the director of the City of Savannah Research Library and Municipal Archives, curated a special group of sources exactly relevant to the material we were studying. In this particular case, the sources pulled all connected to the Yellow Fever epidemics in Savannah in 1820, 1854, and 1876. The first hurdle the students had to clear was reading the handwriting, but I recommended letting students struggle on their own as much as possible. Although

Ms. Spracher and I both assisted with particularly difficult words, the students developed a rhythm after an initial period of exertion and declared the effort to be worthwhile and satisfying once they could decode the sources on their own.

Students were impressed with what they discovered in the curated sources, and one record that many found most interesting was the Death Register of the Health Department, from 1818-1832. Students at first were confused as to what to look for in a series of names and dates, but when prompted to look through the summer months when mosquitos were at their highest, they were shocked to find the tally of deaths increased dramatically as line by line the cause of death was written as “Fever” and “Yellow Fever” or occasionally “Black Vomit” as the disease was then known. To see the deaths listed in black ink on page after page was far more striking to students than any statistics I could have related in the classroom.

Another popular collection was the Interment Report Books which held records of interment at three major cemeteries in Savannah between 1870 and 1903. As a part of our trip, we toured two major Savannah cemeteries prior to our visit to the archives: Colonial Park and Bonaventure. Our tour of Bonaventure in particular involved many stories of both prominent and obscure Savannah residents, and although the students did not know they would later see interment records on our subsequent trip to the archives, they were surprised to find they could look up specific people by date whose stories we had heard on tour. In some cases, they could even verify the oral stories they had heard and discern for themselves what could be confirmed in the written record and what might have been exaggerated. Having seen the burial grounds also gave students an additional interest in the interment records as they could visualize exactly what the records indicated.

Ms. Spracher also pulled for the students the Board of Health’s Committee on Sewage and Drainage Report of 1866. At first, students struggled with the handwriting and the “dry” commentary, but quickly realized that the authors were speculating correctly about the spread of Yellow Fever, blaming stagnant water, “atmosphere, moisture, and excessive vegetation” (Board of Health, 1866, n.p.). Students were intrigued by how close the writers were to discovering the true nature of the disease despite the discovery of viruses still thirty years in the future. They were also interested in the debate between the anti-contagionists (those who supported the view above) and the contagionists who were inclined to blame other factors. Another meeting of the Board of Health in 1854 confirmed that two different doctors recognized the symptoms of Yellow Fever in August and the report indicated that a number of foreigners were dead from the disease over the

next five days. The students also noticed that new cases were almost entirely gone by winter. (Board of Health, 1866).

Students also recognized that even though the spread of Yellow Fever was not clearly understood, many citizens had practical solutions for stopping the spread of the disease, as shown by the City Council Meeting Papers. Three of the documents in this particular folder described the efforts of one physician who was desperate to figure out the cause of Yellow Fever and was even in serious trouble over his interference with the City Council. Students were particularly interested in the fact that local doctors were often very close to guessing the correct cause of the disease, but without proof could not gain government support for their suspicions.

As another student wrote, one of the most intriguing aspects of the archives visit was not just the ability to look at these rare sources, but the realization that the students themselves developed empathy for these people writing about very real events. The students were touching and reading papers and bound materials that in many cases had not been removed from their folders in years if not decades. In that way, the sources were a real bridge between past and present, and an opportunity for a young student to really engage with a local part of the past to make it more tangible, genuine, and vivid. Even the students' struggle with the handwriting was a constant reminder that they were engaging with a very different period and yet an authentic and real record. The fragility and rareness of the sources was a similar signal.

The Savannah City Codes brought up another issue that students had not considered in the case of a nineteenth-century outbreak – that of quarantine. As a port city, Savannah was particularly vulnerable to outbreaks that travelers could easily transmit. But how was a quarantine enforced? Was it effective? Would people abide by it? Was it unfair? How did the living dispose of bodies? (Savannah City Codes, 1854). Another student reflected on The Mayor of Albany writing to the city of Savannah to offer medical assistance in exchange for supplies. The city's rejection of the assistance, raised many questions for this student about Savannah's competitive relationship with other cities, and even Georgia's relationship with other states.

As mentioned above, in conjunction with visiting the archives, we also took students on a tour of the city as well as to Bonaventure Cemetery. We asked them to speculate about the layout of the city in terms of how an epidemic would spread, and for all our city excursions, we asked them to reflect on the documents they had read in the archives and to consider the connections. In formulating these questions, I used the following three Georgia standards of excellence for Social Studies:

- Bridge essential understanding about the past to contemporary events
- Assist students in understanding the nature of historical inquiry and the role of primary and secondary sources
- Encourage the consideration of multiple perspectives on events (Georgia Standards of Excellence).

Below are listed some of the questions I asked students to reflect on after the tour of Savannah:

1. Write a paragraph describing what surprised and/or intrigued you the most from today's tour about the history of Savannah. Be as specific as possible. Speculate on how that design would affect a potential outbreak.

2. What kinds of attitudes towards death does Bonaventure cemetery reflect? What ideas do you see that are specific and/or unusual to the period? Use at least two photos (more are welcome) to specifically illustrate your argument. Reference the photos where necessary. If you wish, compare Bonaventure to other cemeteries you've seen or to Colonial Park cemetery that we saw on our tour of the city of Savannah.

3. What was most interesting to you about your visit to the City Archives of Savannah? Choose one source and, using a photograph of it, describe what was most compelling about it and why. Cite your source correctly at the end of your paragraph.

4. How did the primary sources you encountered at the archives help you better understand Savannah's Yellow Fever epidemic?

5. What different ways did the citizens of Savannah respond to the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1876?

6. If the city of Savannah experienced another epidemic in 2018, what kinds of archival material do you think students would find if they were studying the epidemic in 2154? In other words, what documentary evidence would be left behind?

Findings

In addition to these written responses, students were also asked to respond to a survey designed to measure their achievement of the Archival Literacy standard of acculturation to an archives. Of the students who responded, 75% agreed that based on their experience at the Savannah Municipal Archives, they understood "common policies and protocols for conducting research in archival repositories, including the researcher registration process, the kinds of materials that are commonly not allowed into the repository, and processes for duplication."

(Archival Literacy, standard 28). Similarly, 100% said they could “describe the care and handling processes for using original physical materials. Explain both why these processes are necessary and why they are important” (Archival Literacy, standard 29). After their experience in Savannah, 100% of students agreed that they could use an archive in future research. Although we were limited by small sample size of 22 and the very short duration of the class, in future iterations of the class, I plan to expand the process of student feedback to improve practice and gather detailed feedback on all the Archival Literacy standards.

Archival experiences are just waiting for primary and secondary students and teachers to access, and in fact, “the prestige of archives can increase only when people are aware of and utilize them” (Şentürk, 2013, 113). Many local archives have enormous resources relevant to a history curriculum, but many teachers are unaware of the incredible benefits students can reap from even a half-day in an archive. A visit does not have to be long, especially as follow-up activities can be organized via the archives’ website and other materials available digitally. A good supplemental activity can introduce students to the online finding aids of a particular archives, and an archivist can help with this pursuit. Just making students aware of archival research is an incredible step forward in historical research, but other advantages are numerous: students encounter hands-on access to rare sources, they have the benefit of learning to read and decipher cursive writing, they can practice appropriate citation, and most importantly, practice critical thinking and interpretation with original primary sources. They can learn to be their own historians.

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